

BURMA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

In 2021, the military overthrew the democratically elected civilian government, declaring a state of emergency and creating a State Administration Council, a military-run administrative organization led by armed forces Commander in Chief (CINC) Min Aung Hlaing that assumed executive, legislative, and judicial functions. Democratically elected parliamentarians from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other prodemocracy political parties formed the Committee Representing the Union Parliament (CRPH) before announcing the self-proclaimed National Unity Government (NUG) and National Unity Consultative Council.

Executive Summary

The 2008 constitution, drafted by a previous military regime, guarantees every citizen “the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality, or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution.” The law prohibits speech or acts insulting or defaming any religion or religious beliefs.

As was the case in previous years, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity. During the year, there were reports of threats, detentions, and violence targeting minority religious and ethnoreligious groups. On January 17, media outlets reported a Buddhist monk was among a group of civilians that military forces abducted and forced to serve as a human shield against opposition forces. In March, according to the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), military regime soldiers vandalized, looted, and destroyed Zokhua Baptist Church in Hakha Township, Chin State. In April, approximately 100 military regime soldiers stormed the Sacred Heart Cathedral compound in Mandalay, forcibly entering the church, the archbishop’s house, and other buildings based on unsubstantiated accusations that the church was supplying weapons to opposition forces. An International Commission of Jurists report released in October concluded that some of the military’s raids and attacks on places of worship “could amount to war crimes under international law.” The Office of UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in October that regime authorities had confined 148,000 predominantly Muslim Rohingya in camps within Rakhine State. The regime enforced extensive restrictions on in-country movement of Rohingya. According to a local nongovernmental organization

(NGO), the regime detained at least 2,240 Rohingya individuals during the year, including women and children. Regime-controlled courts sentenced almost all adults to two years in prison and sent the children to the Nget Aw San youth detention center in Twantae Township, Yangon Region, for breaching travel restrictions. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), as of the end of the year, the military regime had detained a total of 91 Buddhist monks since the coup, including 36 during the year. The regime also detained a total of 17 Christian leaders and clerics, including five during the year, and one Muslim religious leader. According to the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), established by the UN Human Rights Council, it collected and analyzed more than three million pieces of evidence of possible human rights violations or abuses in Burma from 2019 to 2022, including reports of approximately 1,300 victims and eyewitnesses in Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Kachin, and Karen States, which all have minority religious populations. Religious leaders also expressed concern the regime might misconstrue religious assembly as part of prodemocracy activities. In May, media outlets reported that the joint advocacy of the Rakhine and Rohingya Student Unions had resulted in the regime's lifting the ban on Rohingya students' attending Sittwe University, although students remained banned from certain courses. In October, media outlets in Rakhine State reported the regime had initiated an appeal to a restriction on the use of land previously occupied by Rohingya who fled the 2017 genocide and crimes against humanity in order to officially register ownership of the land to a regime-controlled border guard force.

According to local media, some ethnic armed organizations operating in the country continued to pose a threat to ethnic and religious minority groups. In October, local media outlets reported the killing of prominent Rohingya teacher and leader Shafikul Islam in Buthidaung Township, Rakhine State, reportedly by the Arakan Army, whose ranks are composed largely of Rakhine Buddhists, which issued a statement denying responsibility for his death. Another Rohingya leader, Sali Hamuk, was killed a few days later, reportedly by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, whose ranks are composed largely of Rakhine Muslims, which also denied responsibility.

There were continued reports of social stigma surrounding any assistance to or sympathy for Rohingya. According to Muslim activists, Rohingya continued to be perceived as not truly belonging to the country, irrespective of citizenship status,

and as belonging to a religion commonly viewed with fear and disdain. There were continued reports of general anti-Muslim prejudice.

Senior U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, the Permanent Representative to the United Nations, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Ambassador, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and senior Department of State officials for East Asia and for human rights consistently raised ongoing U.S. government concerns regarding religious freedom with the prodemocracy groups, members of the wider opposition movement, as well as with international organizations. They also engaged in advocacy on social media calling for an inclusive democracy that respects all ethnicities and religions. Concerns raised included the plight of predominantly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State as well as hardships facing minority religious communities in Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Shan, and Chin States amid escalating post-coup violence. The U.S. government pressed for full accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations, including those concerning religious freedom. In March, the Secretary of State determined that members of the Burmese military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya. On August 24, the United States issued a joint statement with the EU, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and the UK to mark the fifth year since the regime launched its violent attack on Rohingya communities in Rakhine State. U.S. embassy exchange programs continued to prioritize recruitment efforts to increase ethnic and religious diversity. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, continued to engage with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs, to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 30, 2022, the Secretary of State redesignated Burma as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c) (5) of the act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 57.5 million (midyear 2022). According to the most recently available estimates, approximately 88 percent are Theravada Buddhists. Approximately 6 percent are Christians, primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several small Protestant denominations. Muslims (mostly Sunni) comprise approximately 4 percent of the population. There are small communities of Hindus and practitioners of Judaism, traditional Chinese religions, and animist religions. The 2014 census excluded Rohingya from its count. NGOs and the deposed civilian government estimated the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim Rohingya population at 1.1 million prior to October 2016. There are an estimated 600,000 stateless Rohingya in Rakhine State, and according to the United Nations, as of July 13, Bangladesh continues to host approximately 919,000 Rohingya refugees. In addition, an estimated 92,000 and 21,000 Rohingya refugees are hosted in Thailand and India respectively, with smaller Rohingya refugee populations found across the region, including in Indonesia and Nepal.

There is a significant correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Bamar ethnic group and among the Shan, Rakhine, Mon, and numerous other ethnic groups. Various forms of Christianity are dominant among the Kachin, Chin, and Naga ethnic groups. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist, and some Karen are Muslim. Individuals of South Asian ancestry, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south-central region, are predominantly Hindu or Muslim, although some are Christian. Ethnic Rohingya and Kamane in Rakhine State, as well as some Bamar and ethnic Indians in Yangon, Ayeyarwady, Magway, and Mandalay Regions, practice Islam. Chinese ethnic minority groups generally practice traditional Chinese religions and to a lesser extent Islam and Christianity. Some smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions are animists, observing traditional Indigenous beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government and Military Regime Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The 2008 constitution, drafted by a previous military regime, states that every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice his or her religious beliefs. The constitution limits those rights if they threaten public order, health, morality, or other provisions of the constitution. It further provides to all citizens the right to profess and practice their religion if not contrary to laws on security, law and order, community peace, or public order and morality.

The law prohibits deliberate and malicious speech or acts intended to outrage or wound the religious feelings “of any class” by insulting or defaming its religion or religious beliefs. The law also prohibits injuring, defiling, or trespassing on any place of worship or burial grounds with the intent to insult religion.

All organizations, whether secular or religious, must register with the government to obtain official status. This official status is required for organizations to gain title to land, obtain construction permits, and conduct religious activities.

According to regime changes made to the law on registering organizations in October, all local NGOs must now register, regardless of religious affiliation. Failure to comply may result in a prison term of up to five years or a fine of more than K5 million (\$2,400), or both.

The law bars members of religious orders, such as priests, monks, and nuns of any religious group, from running for public office, and the constitution bars members of religious orders from voting. The government restricts by law the political activities and expression of the Buddhist clergy (*sangha*). The constitution forbids “the abuse of religion for political purposes.” The election law states that a candidate’s parents must be citizens at the time of the candidate’s birth; authorities have denied citizenship to most Rohingya, thus precluding most Rohingya from running for office.

Although there is no official state religion, the constitution states the government “recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.” The constitution also “recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism as the religions existing in the Union at the day of the coming into operation of this Constitution.”

The law bans any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. Violations of this ban are punishable by immediate public defrocking and criminal penalties. The nine recognized orders submit to the authority of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SSMNC or Ma Ha Na), an independent but government-supported body that oversees Buddhist affairs and whose members are elected by monks and continues to function under the regime.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture's Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana (Buddhist teaching) oversees the government's relations with Buddhist monks and schools. Religious education is not included in public schools, although some schools with Buddhist-majority student bodies may start the school day with a Buddhist prayer.

Monastic schools, run by monasteries and nunneries in all states and regions of the country, serve approximately 320,000 students. Those that are officially registered use the official state primary and middle school curricula but also teach Buddhist culture and ways of life.

Four laws passed in 2015 for the "protection of race and religion" remain in effect. One of the laws bans polygamy, making it a criminal offense to have more than one spouse, which observers say targets the country's Muslim population. A marriage law specifically for Buddhist women stipulates notification and registration requirements for marriages between non-Buddhist men and Buddhist women, obligations that non-Buddhist husbands must observe, and penalties for noncompliance. A religious conversion law regulates conversion through an extensive application and approval process through a township-level Religious Board for Religious Conversion; however, the law is rarely applied, and many townships do not have conversion boards. The applicant must be older than 18 and must undergo a waiting period of up to 180 days; if the applicant still wishes to convert, the board issues a certificate of religious conversion. A population control law allows for the designation of special zones where population control measures may be applied, including authorizing local authorities to implement three-year birth spacing.

To register a Buddhist marriage, a couple must appear in court with their national identity card (which identifies their religion as Buddhist) and attest that they are

married. Buddhist marriages may be registered at any court with relevant jurisdiction. Christian marriages are regulated under a Christian marriage act dating from 1872, and to be recognized, must be officiated by a Christian religious figure registered with the Supreme Court. There are only a handful of ministers or priests registered in the country. The officiating church must submit details of a marriage from its registry to the Supreme Court within three months of the marriage ceremony solemnization, and only the Supreme Court is permitted to recognize Christian marriages, making it nearly impossible for a Christian marriage to be legally recognized. Muslim marriages officiated by a mullah are recognized under the law with no court filing requirements.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Military Regime Practices

As was the case in previous years, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents based solely on religious identity due to the close linkage between religion and ethnicity. Throughout the year, there were reports of threats, detentions, and violence targeting minority religious and ethnoreligious groups, which, according to media reports, increased under the military regime. According to local and international NGOs, there continued to be almost complete impunity for regime security forces that had committed or continued to commit abuses, including what some NGOs described as genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya, most of whom are Muslim.

According to local media outlets, on December 6, predominantly Christian Karenni opposition forces captured four regime soldiers allegedly linked to the December 2021 massacre of Christian villagers in Hpruso Township, Kayah State. According to *The Irrawaddy*, on Christmas Eve 2021 the military detained, killed, and burned the remains of 35 individuals, including four children and two staff of the international NGO Save the Children. The Christmas Eve massacre, as it was called locally, was likely retribution by the military following a battle between the military and opposition forces. The military also reportedly bound and shot and killed four members sent from opposition forces to negotiate the release of the civilians.

On September 16, the military conducted an airstrike in Depayin Township, Sagaing Region, that destroyed a school within a Catholic monastery compound, killing seven children and injuring another 17. The same day, Radio Free Asia reported that a military airstrike in Moebye Township, Shan State, killed four individuals, including two children, seeking refuge in the Mway Taw Monastery. “When people hear the sound of gunfire and shelling, they hide in the monastery and churches as they think they are safe hiding places,” an eyewitness explained to the local media outlet.

According to an April Radio Free Asia report, regime authorities arrested and killed at least five Buddhist monks for alleged links to People’s Defense Force (PDF) groups, while another 38 monks were being held in various prisons throughout the country.

On January 3, the military burned the Johnson Memorial Baptist Church’s office and children’s home in Thantlang Township, Chin State, according to the CHRO. In December 2021, the military burned 55 houses and religious buildings in the same township, targeting an Assembly of God Church, the Thantlang Baptist Church, and the Association of Thantlang Baptist Churches; the latter is one of the largest churches in the country, according to Open Doors, the self-characterized world’s largest network serving persecuted Christians. Additional examples of the military’s destruction of religious buildings during the year included the destruction of the Chaungkhuah Baptist Church in Kalay Township, Sagaing Region, on February 24, following its use as a military night shelter, and a church destroyed by a military airstrike in Myawaddy Township, Karen State, on May 18 according to local media reports. According to news reports, regime security forces used places of worship for shelter because they believed residents would not attempt to destroy their own religious sites. After a religious site was no longer of use, military forces would often destroy the site, according to the same reports.

On January 17, regime security forces abducted a Buddhist monk along with a group of civilians to serve as human shields in Mindat Township, Chin State, according to news outlet *DVB*.

According to a January report released by Catholic Aid to the Church in Need, at least 14 parishes in Kayah State were abandoned, with clergy hiding in the jungle

or in remote villages with their congregants, who were escaping regime-directed violence. According to a report by Open Doors, the regime's military was intentionally targeting the country's religious and ethnic minorities.

Religious leaders also expressed concern that the regime could misconstrue religious assembly as prodemocracy organizing. A local news outlet reported that on April 8, approximately 100 military soldiers stormed the Sacred Heart Cathedral compound in Mandalay, forcibly entering the church, the archbishop's house, the parish priest's residence, and the clergy center. The regime justified its search of the country's second-largest cathedral by stating the church was supplying opposition forces with weapons, although no evidence was found in the search.

According to Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN), the military continued its elevated post-coup attacks on marginalized minorities throughout the country. BNHR stated that these incidents further escalated on May 20, when military forces set fire to homes and a mosque in Kathar District, Sagaing Region, killing a young girl and her uncle and injuring another person.

In June, regime military raided, burned, and placed land mines around St. Matthew's Church near Demoso, Kayah State, resulting in the injury of a 16-year-old boy, an eyewitness told local media. In July, Amnesty International stated the military's use of land mines amounted to war crimes. On November 24, military soldiers raided and torched Monhla, the home village of Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, in Khin-U Township of Sagaing Region, killing three civilians. Military airstrikes hit Monhla, where approximately one third of the population is Christian, in July along with four other villages with Buddhist residents, and *Myanmar Now* reported some Monhla villagers believed regime military had targeted religious structures.

According to AAPP, by year's end, the military regime had detained a total of 91 Buddhist monks since the coup, including 36 during the year, for participating in protests. The regime also detained a total of 17 Christian leaders and clerics, including five during the year, and one Muslim religious leader for unexplained reasons. According to a Radio Free Asia report in August, the regime had detained approximately five dozen Buddhist monks since it seized power in 2021. An October report by the International Commission of Jurists stated that regime

authorities denied detained religious leaders the ability to practice their faith while in detention. News outlets reported the regime released well-known Buddhist monk Shwe Nya War Sayadaw from Yangon's Insein Prison in November as part of a wider amnesty for more than 5,000 prisoners. The Buddhist leader was charged under the penal code with "intent to cause, or which is likely to cause, fear or alarm to the public or to any section of the public whereby any person may be induced to commit an offence against the State or against the public tranquility." He served nearly two years in prison following the February 2021 coup.

According to the IIMM, it collected and analyzed more than three million pieces of evidence of possible human rights violations or abuses in the country from 2019 to 2022, including reports of approximately 1,300 victims and eyewitnesses in Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Kachin, and Karen States, all states with large minority religious populations. The IIMM head, Nicholas Koumjian, said in a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council that "the people of Myanmar continue to suffer because of the lack of accountability for those who believe they answer to no law." According to the IIMM Report, "There are ample indications that since the military takeover in February 2021, crimes have been committed in Myanmar on a scale and in a manner that constitutes a widespread and systematic attack against a civilian population, and the nature of potential criminality is also expanding. This includes the execution of four individuals by Myanmar's military on July 25."

In an October report, the International Commission of Jurists estimated the regime military had raided 44 religious sites and places of worship by May 31, and it also reported one additional raid by the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, an ethnic armed organization, on a monastery in Namtu Township, Shan State. The raids on Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic sites occurred across the country in Mandalay, Sagaing, Yangon, Irrawaddy, Bago, and Magway Regions, as well as in Kachin, Mon, Chin, Kayah, and Shan States. In the same report, the commission concluded that some of the military's raids and attacks on places of worship "could amount to war crimes under international law."

In December, the regime detained Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson, a prominent Kachin religious leader, charging him later that month under the Unlawful Association Act and the Counter-Terrorism Law. The *Irrawaddy* reported that the

Kachin Baptist Convention, of which Reverend Samson was previously president, said the regime believed his sermons were derogatory to the military.

In December, a special court at Mandalay's Obo Prison sentenced Chin Pastor Thian Lian Sang of the Falam Baptist Church to 23 years in prison. The sentence included three years in prison with hard labor under Section 505(a) and 20 years under Section 49(a) of the Counterterrorism Law. Authorities first arrested the pastor at his home in September 2021.

The regime enforced at least three different laws to limit gatherings, including religious gatherings. A gathering of five or more persons, including for religious reasons, could result in charges and punishment under a natural disaster management law (three months to three years' imprisonment, a fine, or both), a communicable diseases prevention and control law (six months' imprisonment or a fine), or the penal code, for defiance of a government order (one to six months' imprisonment or a fine).

As the democratically elected government had done before it, the regime's Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture continued to restrict non-Buddhist religious teachings to government-approved religious buildings and prohibited prayer services and religious teaching in private homes. Despite this ban, Muslims in areas with few or no mosques continued to conduct prayer services and other religious practices, such as teaching in private homes.

As of December, UNHCR reported that regime authorities continued to confine approximately 148,000 Rohingya in 21 displacement camps in the country. Restrictions on in-country movement of Rohingya remained extensive, with authorities requiring them to carry special documents and obtain travel permits even to travel within Rakhine State, where most Rohingya reside. According to humanitarian aid organizations, regime authorities made no new efforts to initiate the return of Rohingya refugees during the year, most of whom remained in camps in neighboring Bangladesh. According to these organizations, under the military regime, there was no possibility for the voluntary, dignified, safe, and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya.

The regime's General Administration Department continued to take legal action against Rohingya traveling without documentation, a reversal of a 2020 order.

According to a charity organization, the regime had detained at least 2,240 Rohingya individuals during the year, including women and children. Another organization estimated there were more than 3,500 detentions during the year.

Based on various media outlets and news reports, between October and December, the regime arrested at least 941 Rohingya individuals in different parts of the country. By the end of the year, the regime had cumulatively arrested and detained over 2,241 Rohingya individuals, excluding those who went missing or had died. Authorities sentenced almost all adults to two years in prison and sent the children to the Nget Aw San Youth Detention Center in Twantae Township, Yangon Region. The largest arrest occurred on August 12, when authorities arrested 150 Rohingya individuals in Pa-an Township, Karen State. Rakhine local media reported that human smuggling of Rohingya from Rakhine State to Malaysia continued, including 316 cases identified in February.

According to news reports and representatives of ethnic and religious communities, during the year, the regime tightly restricted external access to ethnic majority areas where religious minorities also lived, including access by UN, humanitarian, and media organizations. Fighting between military and some ethnic armed organizations, such as the Chin National Front, the largely Christian Kachin Independence Organization, and the Karenni National Progressive Party, escalated after the coup, although it was difficult to categorize the increase in fighting as primarily religiously motivated. The United Nations reported that as of December 26, more than 1,505,700 persons were newly displaced since the coup, including from ethnic and religious minority areas such as Kayah, Karen, and Chin States. Bamar-majority areas such as Sagaing and Magway Regions also saw a significant rise in internally displaced persons. According to the Karenni Civil Society Network, as of September 28, more than 202,115 persons had been displaced since May 2021, of whom 95 percent were Karenni Christian, due to the escalation in violence between the military and ethnic armed organizations. According to CHRO, as of August, a total of 52,259 persons, mostly Christian, had crossed into India, and members of the displaced Christian Chin community were living in 12 different places within Mizoram State and in New Delhi.

In October, media outlets in Rakhine State reported the regime had initiated an appeal to a restriction on the use of land previously occupied by Rohingya who

fled the 2017 genocide and crimes against humanity in order to officially register ownership of the land to a regime-controlled border guard force.

The regime continued to restrict the right to freedom of association, including of religious groups. In the run-up to the November 2020 general elections, the now deposed NLD-led civilian government reinterpreted the law on registering organizations to require NGOs that received foreign funding to register with the government. After the coup, the regime required banks to report on all foreign funds received by both local and international NGOs. According to various religious groups and NGOs, the process to register an NGO remained lengthy and was often unsuccessful.

According to representatives of some civil society groups, NGOs refrained from registering because doing so would require providing extensive information on the staff to the regime, which they preferred not to provide. In October, the regime imposed new rules requiring compulsory registration for both local and international NGOs and associations and imposing criminal penalties for organizations that failed to comply, with a punishment of up to five years in prison. One NGO leader said the new law had left civil society organizations in a dilemma. While they hesitated to register under the new law because they considered the regime illegitimate, they were concerned that they could not continue to operate without formal registration. *Frontier Myanmar* reported that neither the United Nations Country Team, composed of UN offices present in the country, nor international NGOs operating in the country had spoken out publicly about the new law for fear of retribution from the regime. The UN Human Rights Office for Southeast Asia, however, stated it was deeply concerned about “the potential negative impact on civic space and human rights” of the new rules on the registration of NGOs in Burma. A Rakhine State-based civil society representative told *Frontier*, “All CSOs have been worried about [a crackdown]; now it’s really happening ... They are oppressing us openly.”

CHRO said they consider the new NGO registration law to be inherently anti-democratic and dangerously draconian, and that the new law would open up a floodgate for unlawful interference and encroachment on civic space by state agents of the regime. According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, the new law, regulating both domestic and international NGOs, violated the

law on freedom of association by mandating registration, enforcing criminal penalties, and severely restricting legitimate civil society activities.

According to CHRO, neither the government overthrown in February 2021, nor the subsequent military regime issued any permits to Christian groups to register and own land and properties. All such registration applications remained pending at year's end, with some pending for more than 16 years.

Religious groups throughout the country, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and especially Muslims, continued to report difficulties and delays that could last for years in obtaining permits to allow construction of and repairs to religious buildings. Buddhist leaders said obtaining such permission was more difficult for non-Buddhist groups. Representatives of religious groups said the need for multiple permissions, unclear authority, and interminable delays in responses to requests for permits led them to construct places of worship without the required permissions. Others said it was necessary to bribe authorities to obtain permits.

According to Radio Free Asia, as of April, the regime military had destroyed at least 132 religious buildings, including at least 66 churches in Chin State alone and 20 churches and a mosque in Kayah State. The military destroyed a total of 33 religious buildings in Sagaing Region, including 28 Buddhist monasteries, a Buddhist convent, two mosques, and two churches, between the coup and June. In Magway Region, the military destroyed at least 11 Buddhist monasteries and a church.

On March 26, according to CHRO, regime soldiers vandalized, looted, and destroyed Zokhua Baptist Church in Hakha Township, Chin State. The soldiers also vandalized private properties and killed many livestock. The next day, the same soldiers vandalized a Baptist church in Tinam Village on Hakha-Gangaw National Highway, after they had used the building for overnight shelter and commemorated Armed Forces Day inside the church.

According to local media and NGOs, there were no reports the regime held perpetrators accountable for crimes against members of religious minority communities. NGOs also said regime authorities prevented them from legally owning land and constructing religious buildings. In Rakhine State, according to the United Nations and media reports, the situation remained unchanged from

2019, with the movement of members of various ethnic and religious groups, particularly Rohingya, restricted by the regime. Depending on the township, restrictions usually required the submission of an immigration form. A traveler could obtain this form only from the township of origin's immigration and national registration department and only if that person provided an original copy of a family list, temporary registration card, and letters from two guarantors. The form typically authorized travel for two to four weeks but was issued almost exclusively for medical emergencies, according to human rights activists. Sources stated that obtaining travel permits often involved extortion and bribes. Muslims throughout the country still faced restrictions on travel into and out of Rakhine State and reportedly feared authorities would not allow them to leave Rakhine State if they were to visit.

According to NGOs, such restrictions continued to impede the ability of Rohingya to pursue livelihoods and education, access markets, hospitals, and other services, and engage other communities. Sources stated that individuals stereotyped by regime security forces as appearing to be Muslim continued to receive additional scrutiny on their movements in the region, regardless of their actual religion; obtaining these travel permits often involved extortion and bribes.

Human rights organizations continued to state that laws passed in 2015 for the "protection of race and religion" were again not enforced during the year.

Due to continuing regime-imposed restrictions of movement on Rohingya, many Rohingya could not access education in state-run schools. Rohingya and Kaman children in central Rakhine State had physical access to only one high school, located in Thet Kae Pyin, Sittwe Township. In May, the joint advocacy of the Rakhine and Rohingya Student Unions resulted in the regime lifting the ban on Rohingya students attending Sittwe University, although students remained banned from certain courses, such as law, medicine, and geography. Authorities continued to bar any university students who did not possess citizenship cards from graduating, which disproportionately affected students from religious minorities, particularly Muslim students. These students could attend classes and take examinations but could not receive diplomas unless they had a citizenship card, the application for which required some religious minorities to identify as a "foreign" ethnic minority.

Buddhists continued to make up nearly all senior officials within the military and civil service. Applications for civil service and military positions continued to require the applicant to list his or her religion.

Authorities continued to require citizens and permanent residents to carry government-issued identification cards that permitted holders to access services and prove citizenship. The cards indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity. Citizens were also required to indicate their religion on certain official applications for documents such as passports, although passports themselves did not indicate the bearer's religion. Members of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, continued to face problems obtaining identification and citizenship cards. Some Muslims reported they were required to indicate a "foreign" ethnicity if they self-identified as Muslim on their application for a citizenship card. For those who mentioned their religion as Muslim, their ethnicity automatically printed as "Bengali" on their national identity card, regardless of their ethnic affiliation.

The regime halted the deposed government's previous call for Rohingya to participate in the citizenship verification process and to apply for National Verification Cards (NVCs). The regime announced a citizenship documentation project in May 2021, which, it stated, was a concerted, nationwide effort to issue household registration lists and national identification cards and a means to prevent the kind of voter fraud the military regime said occurred in the 2020 general election. According to a regime-controlled media report, over 3.4 million persons age 16 and older were projected to receive a National Registration Card (NRC) under the 18-month Pan Khin Project from May 2021 to November 3, 2022. The director general of the Department of National Registration and Citizenship told regime media it had implemented 90 percent of the project, having successfully completed the project in the Bago and Ayeyarwady Regions and in the Nay Pyi Taw Council area. The same media stated that as of May 31, the regime had issued over three million NRC cards and that over 400,000 household registration lists had been issued nationwide. The same report contained no mention of authorities issuing citizenship cards and household registration lists to Rohingya through the program.

A June report by the NGO Fortify Rights stated, "The NVC process is an integral part of protracted attempts to deny Rohingya their identity and citizenship." Further, the report said, "Identity politics in Myanmar have a strong "racial" as

well as religious component and, while not the sole cause of the atrocities, were and are a contributing factor.”

On January 9, according to local media, the military scattered propaganda leaflets from helicopters in Kamma and Pakokku Townships, Magway Region, that read, “The Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) propagandizing the Buddhist people will turn on each other. [The OIC is] bribing [the PDF] with money and supporting them with weapons” and, “The KIA (Kachin Independence Army) has entered Sagaing Region and is helping the PDFs, so that fighting breaks out among the Buddhists.” Similar leaflets were also dropped at least three times in Yangon, Sagaing, and Magway Regions, as well as in other parts of the country.

Regime-controlled media continued to frequently report on officials and military personnel paying respect to Buddhist monks, offering donations at pagodas, and organizing “people’s donations” of money and food. In February, former President Thein Sein formed the Sone Mart Thoe Shwe Pyi Taw Charity Association, made up of members of the promilitary United Solidarity and Development Party and other promilitary allies, to donate food, assist military-affiliated families, and contribute to a blood drive for local communities.

On the one-year anniversary of the military coup, CINC Min Aung Hlaing said Buddhism had declined under the NLD government, and he credited himself with reopening religious buildings and pagodas, according to *The Irrawaddy*. An October report by Nyan Lynn Thit Analytica said Min Aung Hlaing, in the same speech, accused the NLD government of actions that led to the “downfall of race and religion.” The day after the CINC’s speech, a prominent Buddhist monk told local media the regime was trying to pit members of the Buddhist religious community against one another and against the Bamar people.

On February 25, according to a local monitoring group and a promilitary social media report, the promilitary Young Men’s Buddhist Association issued a statement in support of the regime-appointed delegation that represented Burma at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In June, regime-controlled media published a statement that it was “disappointed” by the ICJ’s June 22 rejection of all preliminary objections in the Rohingya genocide case brought by The Gambia.

On March 23, the Patriotic Myanmar Monks Union released a statement condemning the Secretary of State's determination in March that members of the Burma military regime had committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya and the use of "propaganda" by the United States in collaboration with 57 OIC member countries, which, it stated ignored the violence committed by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army against more than 30 police stations and ethnic Rakhine. Objecting to "interference into the internal affairs of a sovereign state," the regime stated the U.S. government had cited "false reports."

In May, according to opposition-controlled media, the regime revoked the license of local bookseller and publisher Lwin Oo for selling the book *Myanmar's Rohingya Genocide* by author Ronan Lee, which details the Rohingya genocide. The regime's revocation cited the publisher's alleged violations of country's publishing and printing law, which forbids expression that can cause racial or cultural violence between ethnic groups. According to media reports, during the year, the regime's Ministry of Information (MOI) banned two additional publishing houses that it accused of publishing books insulting Buddhism and monks. A regime MOI representative said the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs also consented to banning these publishing houses.

A July report by Reuters revealed the Commission for International Justice and Accountability's investigation of military regime leaders' plans to demolish Rohingya Muslim homes and mosques and "how the military systematically demonized the Muslim minority, created militias that would ultimately take part in operations against the Rohingya, and coordinated their actions with ultranationalist Buddhist monks."

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to local media, some ethnic armed organizations operating in the country continued to pose a threat to ethnic and religious minority groups.

In October, local media reported the killing of prominent Rohingya teacher and leader Shafikul Islam in Buthidaung Township, Rakhine State, reportedly by the Arakan Army, which issued a statement denying responsibility for his death. Another Rohingya leader, Sali Hamuk, was killed a few days later, reportedly by

the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, which also denied responsibility for the killing.

On August 1, regime commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing stated in a speech that PDF groups were responsible for having killed at least 52 monks since the February 2021 military coup. The regime stated 33 monks were killed, and seven others injured in a single April 3 attack by the PDF.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In March, the self-proclaimed NUG released a statement saying it welcomed the U.S. government's determination on Rohingya genocide and crimes against humanity and stood by its "policy position on the Rohingya in Rakhine State" issued in June 2021 and in which the NUG commits to the "safe, voluntary, and dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees and internally displaced persons and to comprehensive legislative and policy reform in support of citizenship, equality in rights and opportunity, and justice and reparations."

On September 9, the NUG's "Ministry of Education" and the Rohingya Leaders for Education Organization discussed and agreed on a plan for Rohingya students' access to education. On September 14, the spokesperson for the NUG Office of the Acting President, Kyaw Zaw, issued a personal apology to Rohingya for a hurtful statement delivered by Kyaw Zaw before the Canada Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights in an effort to defend Burma's civilian government.

According to Muslim activists, Rohingya continued to be perceived as not truly belonging to the country, irrespective of citizenship status, and as belonging to a religion commonly viewed with fear and disdain. There were continued reports of general anti-Muslim prejudice.

Despite a continuing order by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, a government-appointed body of high-ranking Buddhist monks that oversees and regulates the Sangha, that no group or individual operate under the banner of Ma Ba Tha, a Buddhist ultra-nationalist group banned under the National League for Democracy government, some branches of the group continued to use the name Ma Ba Tha, while others used the new name, Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation.

Nationalist, anti-Muslim monk Wirathu released a video clip in July in which he criticized prodemocracy groups, particularly the PDF group Nan Htike Aung, from Yangon Region, calling them cowards who use guerilla tactics. The monk challenged the PDF group to fight the military and its supporters “hand to hand, knife to knife, gun to gun, and word for word.” “If you guys are real men, come and fight, fight the military when they come to your village,” he added.

In August, proregime and nationalist groups organized celebrations across the country to commemorate the 61st National Buddhist Day and Noble Love Day, during which Ma Ba Tha monks, including Wirathu, Sayardaw Pantita, and Pinna Nanda, delivered Buddhist nationalist messaging and called on the military regime to pass legislation to protect Buddhism. In August, Wirathu published a book of Sule Nanda literature that discussed protecting national race, religion, and culture. According to a Nationalist Movement Monitoring Team report, on October 27, Wirathu preached at a Kathein fundraiser event held in Nattalin Township, Bago Region, where regime security forces provided him with a security detail.

On June 11, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Myanmar called for respect for human life and the sanctity of places of worship, hospitals, and schools.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, senior U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, the Permanent Representative to the United Nations, the USAID Administrator, the Ambassador, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and senior Department of State officials for East Asia and for human rights, consistently raised ongoing U.S. concerns regarding religious freedom, including the plight of predominantly Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State and the hardships facing Christian minority religious communities in Kachin, northern Shan, and Chin States amid ongoing violence. Senior U.S. officials also engaged in advocacy on social media, calling for an inclusive democracy that respects all ethnicities and religions and standing against violence and hate speech targeting religious minorities.

On March 21, at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, the Secretary of State announced he had determined that members of the Burma

military regime had committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya. In his remarks, the Secretary said, “The U.S. reaffirms its broader commitment to helping Rohingya on this path out of genocide—toward truth, toward accountability and toward a home that will welcome them as equal members, and respect their human rights and dignity, alongside that of all people in Burma.” Pointing to the United States’ continued efforts to hold the military regime accountable for its actions, the Secretary announced at the event that the United States would contribute nearly a million dollars in additional funding to support the United Nations’ Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar and its collection and analysis of evidence of international crimes in Burma. In April, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, to learn first-hand about the challenges Rohingya have faced since fleeing brutal violence and persecution in Burma.

The U.S. government continued to press for full accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses, including individuals who violate religious freedom. In February 2022, the President extended Executive Order 14014, Blocking Property with Respect to the Situation in Burma, which stated, in part, that the military “unjustly arrested and detained government leaders, politicians, human rights defenders, journalists, and religious leaders.” On three occasions during the year – March, October, and November – the United States expanded sanctions to include 74 individuals and 29 entities for human rights violations, including for violations of the freedom of religion or belief.

U.S. government officials continued to encourage international efforts to address religiously motivated violence. On August 24, the United States signed a joint statement with the EU, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and the UK to mark the fifth year since the regime launched its violent attack on Rohingya communities in Rakhine State. The statement noted, “[The military’s] deplorable actions against Rohingya precipitated one of the largest mass exoduses of a minority in recent history. The same actors that committed these reprehensible actions led the military coup d’état in February 2021, and today continue to perpetrate atrocities against political dissidents and vulnerable populations, including other ethnic and religious minorities across Myanmar, and have done so for decades.” Also on August 24, the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh, joined 13 other embassies and high commissions to issue a joint statement that called

“for an end of the culture of impunity in Myanmar and reiterate our commitment to international accountability initiatives for the terrible acts committed against Rohingya.”

Further supporting international efforts to hold the military accountable, on July 23, the State Department spokesperson tweeted that the United States welcomed the International Court of Justice’s rejection of the Myanmar military’s preliminary objections to allegations it violated the Genocide Convention.

U.S. government support for the Burma-Bangladesh humanitarian crisis response included more than \$363 million in 2022, with nearly \$90 million for programs in Burma and approximately \$265 million for programs in Bangladesh. Since August 2017, the U.S. government has provided nearly \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya crisis response. In 2021 Burma-Bangladesh humanitarian crisis response included more than \$242 million, with nearly \$60 million for programs in Burma and approximately \$142 million for programs in Bangladesh.

Embassy officials at all levels emphasized the importance of addressing the effects of ethnoreligious violence and hate speech, including anti-Muslim rhetoric. Embassy officials promoted religious freedom and meaningful inclusion during meetings with the opposition NUG, CRPH, and the National Unity Consultative Council, as well as with ethnic armed organizations and other ethnic and religious leaders.

Although embassy travel to ethnic and religious minority-predominant areas was curtailed in 2020 and 2021 by the COVID-19 pandemic and the February 2021 coup, discussions of religious freedom and tolerance with NGOs and members of community-based organizations and religious communities continued.

The embassy emphasized the need for respect for religious freedom, tolerance, and unity in its interactions with all sectors of society, in public engagements, and through its social media accounts. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, continued to engage with Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of faculties of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy also posted content on Facebook, Facebook Stories, and Twitter to engage local audiences on the importance of religious pluralism, tolerance, and shared identity in democratic societies, including the recognition of minority religious holidays. On October 9, the Ambassador issued a statement on Facebook to mark the end of Buddhist Vassa, an annual period of fasting and reflection. The statement called for peace and prosperity for all during a time of hardship, with comments acknowledging U.S. efforts in raising awareness of shared values among all faiths. Marking the passing of respected Buddhist monk Myawaddy Sayadaw, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious freedom published a November 1 tweet that stated Myawaddy Sayadaw was “a strong voice in Burma for interfaith dialogue and respect for all,” which the embassy retweeted.

The embassy regularly published statements highlighting concerns regarding religiously based tensions and anti-Muslim discrimination, as well as calling for respect for religious diversity, unity, and tolerance.

While embassy facilities in Yangon and Mandalay suspended most of their public programs following the coup, the embassy continued to prioritize ethnic and religious diversity in its exchange and scholarship programs, including participants from Shan, Wa, Kachin, Kayah, Chin, Rakhine, and Mon ethnic groups, many of whom belong to religious minority groups. As in prior years, the embassy worked with and supported NGOs working on programs promoting religious freedom and tolerance, as well as with former participants of U.S. government exchange programs promoting tolerance and equal access to basic health care, education, and mental health resources, regardless of religious affiliation.

Since 1999, Burma has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 30, 2022, the Secretary of State redesignated Burma as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) pursuant to section 402(c) (5) of the act.